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**Jean Brodie and
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The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is a novel of Edinburgh. This phrase applies, however, in both the ordinary sense--the novel is set in Edinburgh and presents the reader with characters who were born and have spent their lives there--and the strict sense--the novel is, at its deepest level, "about Edinburgh."¹ Jean Brodie herself functions as a personification of certain attitudes common to the citizens of Edinburgh, attitudes that are basically religious or theological in nature.

In the most concrete terms, her hostility to the Roman Catholic Church is one such attitude: although she was "by temperament suited only" to this faith, she "shunned" it because she was capable of "bringing to her support a rigid Edinburgh-born side of herself when the Catholic Church was in question."² In a larger and more comprehensive view, however, Jean Brodie is the literal embodiment of the city's Calvinist spirit.³ This connection Muriel Spark makes primarily through the thoughts of Sandy Stranger, one of Miss Brodie's favorite pupils at Marcia Blaine School. Sandy first discovers Calvinism as something that "prevaded the place in proportion as it was unacknowledged" (133), as a "quality of life peculiar to Edinburgh and nowhere else" (132): she becomes, in effect, an anti-Calvinist. She later decides to "betray" Jean Brodie when she concludes that her former teacher is attempting to play the role of "the God of Calvin" in the lives of her

students (147). This betrayal is the central action of the entire book: Jean Brodie's teaching career is finished as a result, and yet Sandy Stranger carries her anti-Calvinist revolt to the point of actually converting to Catholicism and entering a convent.

But Jean Brodie never represents to Sandy Calvinism as pure idea, as the unapplied doctrine of John Calvin: she is rather the personification of Calvinism only as it exists in Edinburgh. For example, when Sandy "felt warmly towards Miss Brodie,"

it was then that Miss Brodie looked beautiful and fragile, just as dark heavy Edinburgh itself could suddenly be changed into a floating city when the light was a special pearly white and fell upon one of the gracefully fashioned streets. (136)

In Sandy's mind, person and place cannot be easily disassociated. And later, when Jean Brodie (who knows only that one of her favorite girls has betrayed her but not which one) interrogates Sandy on this point, Spark's language suggests the same sort of identification of the geographical with the human:

The whine in her voice--" . . . betrayed me, betrayed me"--bored and afflicted Sandy. It is seven years, thought Sandy, since I betrayed this tiresome woman. What does she mean by "betray"? She was looking at the hills as if to see there the first and unbetraysable Miss Brodie, indifferent to criticism as a crag. (75)

Why is Jean Brodie here likened to a crag? The reason is not so much, as David Lodge suggests,⁴ that the diction is Biblical as that Edinburgh itself contains such a crag: the Castle Rock. Here is Spark's own account--taken from an autobiographical sketch--of the Rock as one of "the physical features of the place" that had "an effect as special as themselves on the outlook of the people":

The Castle Rock is something, rising up as it does from pre-history between the formal grace of the New Town and the noble network of the Old. To have a great primitive black crag rising up in the middle of populated streets of commerce, stately squares and winding closes, is like the statement of an unmitigated fact preceded by "nevertheless."⁵

It is odd to say that a crag is "indifferent to criticism" but perhaps less odd to say so in Edinburgh than anywhere else.

Spark's use here of "nevertheless" requires some explanation, but the gloss itself, interestingly enough, sheds further light on the psychology of Jean Brodie. "Nevertheless," Spark writes in this same essay, was a word around which

my whole education, in and out of school, seemed even then to pivot. All grades of society constructed sentences bridged by "nevertheless." It is my own instinct to associate the word, as the core of a thought-pattern, with Edinburgh particularly.⁶

Thus, while admitting that "it is impossible to know how much one gets from one's early environment by way of a distinctive character," Spark asserts that the place, through such features as the Castle Rock, impresses the minds of its inhabitants with the "nevertheless" principle. She next describes the effect of this conditioning on herself:

I believe myself to be fairly indoctrinated by the habit of thought which calls for this word. In fact I approve of the ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer-readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement "nevertheless, it's raining." I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.⁷

This last statement brings us squarely back to Jean Brodie, for she, it seems, *failed* to convert on precisely the same principle.⁸

Her disapproval of the Church of Rome was based on her assertions that it was a church of superstition, and that only people who did not want to think for themselves were Roman Catholics. In some ways, her attitude was a strange one, because she was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church; possibly it could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, it might even have normalised her. But perhaps this was the reason that she shunned it, lover of Italy though she was, bringing to her support a rigid Edinburgh-born side of herself when the Catholic Church was in question, although this side was not otherwise greatly in evidence. (105)

In short she "was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church." Nevertheless, "she shunned it."

On a stylistic level, the final sentence of this passage is

itself an example of the "nevertheless" principle. It is first qualified by the "perhaps," which suggests that the author herself cannot be sure about this matter, and then totally undercut by the ironic "although" clause. What side, Spark seems to ask here, is more in evidence than the "rigid Edinburgh-born side"? For Sandy, by the end, that is the only side of Jean Brodie that matters. "She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (147).

But it is not just through Sandy's eyes that the reader comes to see Jean Brodie as an embodiment of the spirit of Edinburgh. For example, she frequently proclaims herself a spokesman for the city in cultural matters. She says at one point, "'We of Edinburgh owe a lot to the French. We are Europeans'" (41). And Spark later refers to her as someone who calls "Edinburgh an European capital, the city of Hume and Boswell" (153). But, more importantly she claims as ancestor a famous character in the history of Edinburgh.

"I am a descendant, do not forget, of Willie Brodie, a man of substance, a cabinet maker and designer of gibbets, a member of the Town Council of Edinburgh and a keeper of two mistresses who bore him five children between them. Blood tells. He played much dice and fighting cocks. Eventually he was a wanted man for having robbed the Excise Office--not that he needed the money, he was a night burglar only for the sake of the danger in it. Of course, he was arrested abroad and was brought back to the Tolbooth prison, but there was mere chance. He died cheerfully on a gibbet of his own devising in seventeen-eighty-eight. However all this may be, it is the stuff I am made of." (108-09)

Again Willie Brodie himself illustrates the "nevertheless" principle perfectly (he had wealth and position, and yet he broke into other people's houses), and Jean Brodie's account of him also enacts on the level of style its curious workings ("Of course . . . but . . ."). But Willie Brodie is much more than an example or precedent from the ancestral past: since his death he has remained a presence in Edinburgh, he is a part of the city itself.

In 1878, for example, Robert Louis Stevenson could write that the story of Willie Brodie was one of those actions that express "the character of a place," one of "the tales that are singularly apposite and characteristic . . . of the very constitution of built nature in that part."

An event strikes root and grows into a legend, when it

has happened amongst congenial surroundings. Ugly actions, above all in ugly places, have the true romantic quality, and become an undying property of their scene.⁹

In this account Stevenson chooses to stress the "undying" quality of the Brodie legend:

Here . . . the fame of Deacon Brodie is kept piously fresh. . . . Still, by the mind's eye, he may be seen, a man harassed below a mountain of duplicity, slinking from a magistrate's supper-room to a thief's ken, and pickeering among the closes by the flicker of a dark lamp.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, it is Stevenson himself who is primarily responsible for having kept that fame "fresh" well into the second half of the twentieth century: through his writings about the Deacon, he has insured the survival of the Brodie presence in Edinburgh. In fact, the contemporary tourist who searches the city for a sign of that presence will most likely find it in the Stevenson collection in Lady Stair's House: a cabinet labeled "Deacon Brodie's Chest."

Stevenson's fascination with Willie Brodie began early and lasted for almost twenty years. In 1866, when he was only sixteen, he worked on a short story about the Deacon but eventually gave it up; nothing remains of this attempt.¹¹ Twelve years later he composed the essay quoted above as one in a series of ten Edinburgh sketches, originally published during 1878 in the magazine *Portfolio* and within a year's time republished in book form as *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*. Also in 1878 Stevenson collaborated with W. E. Henley on a "melodrama" entitled *Deacon Brodie, or the Double Life*, which was then jointly re-written in 1884. Though it was published and staged in both versions, the play was never much of a success, and after this effort at revision Stevenson apparently did not return to the Brodie story as a subject for literary composition.¹²

There can be no doubt concerning Muriel Spark's thorough familiarity with both *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* and *Deacon Brodie*: no writer grows up in Edinburgh without knowing the greatest "Edinburgh-born" author after Scott, and, in any case, Sandy Stranger is actually reading (and continually daydreaming about) *Kidnapped* in the novel. Jean Brodie's own account of the Deacon would even seem to owe something to Stevenson's in the volume of essays. Having described in detail a burglary attempt which gave away Brodie's secret, Stevenson remarks that

it is characteristic of the town and the town's manners

that this little episode should have been quietly tidied over, and quite a good time elapsed before a great robbery, an escape, a Bow Street runner, a cockfight, an apprehension in a cupboard in Amsterdam, and a last step into the air off his own greatly improved gallows drop, brought the career of Deacon William Brodie to an end.¹³

Muriel Spark has Jean Brodie mention all these facts except the "Bow Street runner" and adds only that he was "a member of the Town Council of Edinburgh and a keeper of two mistresses" (108).

More important, perhaps, are certain similarities between the plots of the Spark novel and the Stevenson-Henley melodrama. In writing both versions of *Deacon Brodie*, the two men rejected completely the actual (but highly ironic) ending of Willie Brodie's life and chose instead to have him killed by a police detective as he attempts to avoid arrest for the Excise Office burglary. This detective (whose name, aptly enough, is Hunt but who is generally referred to as "the Bow Street runner") thus figures prominently in the whole play: from the very start the audience is aware, though Brodie is not, that Hunt is in relentless pursuit of him. Hunt is therefore roughly paralleled to Miss Mackay in Spark's novel, the head-mistress of Marcia Blaine, who persecutes and spies on Jean Brodie throughout and who in the end gloatingly presides over her ouster from the school. And, just as Sandy Stranger betrays Jean Brodie into the hands of Miss Mackay, one Andrew Ainslie betrays Willie Brodie into Hunt's clutches. He is a trusted member of the Deacon's gang of burglars and is thus again like Sandy, who belongs to the inner circle of "the Brodie set." But here the paralleled stops: whereas the relationship between Jean Brodie and Sandy is at the heart of the novel, that between Willie Brodie and Ainslie has little meaning and power for the play's audience. Stevenson and Henley devote all of their big scenes to the Deacon and the various members of his family, each of whom he has deceived and mistreated in a different way.

Finally, a parallel can of course be drawn between Jean Brodie herself and the hero of *Deacon Brodie*. Both are "Edinburgh-born," respectable citizens of the town, and yet (which is to say, "nevertheless") both are rebels against Edinburgh's elaborate social conventions and strict moral code. They rebel on a vastly different scale: while the Deacon commits robbery and murder, Jean Brodie teaches her girls about "the Buchmanites and Mussolini, the Italian Renaissance painters, the advantages to the skin of cleansing cream and witch-hazel over honest soap and water, and the word 'menarche'" (8)

instead of the facts of history and geography. But it is the spirit behind the rebellion that matters, and not its nature or extent, for the more one rebels against a certain part or aspect of Edinburgh the more one reveals one's identity as "Edinburgh-born." This, then, is the point, I think, that Muriel Spark was attempting to establish through her heroine's name and claim of descent and through the placing of that name in the actual title of the novel: like her putative ancestor, Jean Brodie was at no time more of Edinburgh than when she was against it.

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NOTES

1. Frank Kermode is the critic who has come closest to making this point when he remarks (in an essay first published in 1963) that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* "should ideally be read aloud by a lady who has preserved the Edinburgh accent in all its soft severity" ("Muriel Spark: To *The Girls of Slender Means*" in *Continuities* [New York, 1968] p. 206).

2. Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (New York, 1966), p. 105. All subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

3. David Lodge has clearly established the importance of Jean Brodie's Calvinism for every interpretation of the novel. See his essay "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*" in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (London, 1971), pp. 119-44.

4. Lodge, pp. 143-44.

5. Muriel Spark, "Edinburgh-born," *New Statesman*, 10 August 1962, p. 180.

6. Spark, "Edinburgh-born," p. 180.

7. Spark, "Edinburgh-born," p. 180.

8. Spark's own conversion to Catholicism is reflected variously in her work, but perhaps most directly in her first novel, *The Comforters*. On the experience itself, see her other autobiographical essay (actually an interview with W. J.

Weatherby), "My Conversion," *Twentieth Century*, 170 (1961), 58-63.

9. Robert Louis Stevenson, "Legends" in *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes, The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson: South Seas Edition* (New York, 1925), II, 287.

10. Stevenson, II, 288.

11. Edwin M. Eigner, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, 1966), p. 121.

12. Some traces of the Brodie story are said to be visible in Stevenson's handling of his later and much more famous "double-lived" character, Dr. Henry Jekyll, especially in the original version of the *Strange Case* which is no longer extant. See Eigner, pp. 150-151.

13. Stevenson, II, 288.